

Bad by flippyspoon

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy's mom was Catholic, Child Abuse, Drama, Friendship, Homophobia, M/M, Romance, Team Shitty Dads

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Eleven, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Probably More People - Character, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Eleven & Billy Hargrove

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-23

Updated: 2017-12-03

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:08:34

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 5

Words: 20,996

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Billy hates the cold but he takes walks in the snowy woods anyway.
Never know who you'll meet there.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Holy Mary Mother of god, pray for us authors of WIPs. Let us complete our holy mission.

Billy let the engine idle and watched Max stop on the front step of their house, struggling with the zipper of her hoodie, her new winter jacket off her shoulders before she pulled it snug around her.

There was snow on the ground now and the cold bit at his skin like stinging gnats, but everyone else seemed to act like that was normal. He had claimed to have a date and didn't. He'd run through five girls at Hawkins High already, each one agitating him more than the one before even if some small quieter part of him knew it wasn't their fault. He'd imagined Steve Harrington on the other end of seven blow-jobs and it had been *okay* except when he'd see flashes of Steve's bloody face under his fists instead of Steve's face unmarred when he thought no one was watching, when his full mouth was relaxed and his eyes soft as he sat in class thinking about whatever he was thinking about which was probably not *Walden*. But Billy was usually watching.

Max got in the car and shut the door and Billy tried not to think about Steve Harrington as he peeled out of the drive.

They were silent on the way to the arcade and Max stared out at the snow, tapping her fingers on the buckle of her belt. She was edgy, he could tell, because she couldn't skateboard in snow. He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he was sure, and it irritated him. He pursed his lips around his cigarettes. Nugent screeched.

"Outta there by eight," Billy said, exhaling through his nose.

"Yeah."

"I'm serious."

"Yeah, I *heard* you."

At the arcade, Max was unbuckling before the car had stopped and Billy said, "If you're not standing outside at eight o'clock, duct tape's not gonna fix that board this time."

"Can't skate right now anyway, asshole." She flipped him off and her thick red hair whipped around as she dashed to the front doors of the arcade.

So he had been right.

Why did that piss him off too?

He let the engine idle again, the sound was comforting.

Outside he watched a station wagon pull up.

He watched Lucas Sinclair hop out of his parent's car and stop to tie his boots. His little sister jumped out of the backseat and ran around to the front and attempted to shove him out of the way so she could open the door. Lucas's father got out of the car and glanced around, tugging on the collar of his long wool coat. He walked around to Lucas's side and playfully tugged on the hood of the little girl's jacket and she stuck her tongue out. He took change out of his coat pocket and handed it over and Lucas who nodded, grinning. The father rubbed his son's head just before he ran off to the arcade.

Billy sucked on his cigarette and blew smoke at the windshield.

Lucas's father tucked the little girl into the front seat. Billy saw Mr. Sinclair catch sight of him sitting in his idling Camaro. He had the abruptly wary expression of somebody forced to be paying attention but he only got in his car and pulled out of the lot.

The back of Billy's head still hurt where his father had slammed into a shelf the night before.

Since his run-in with a bat full of nails, Billy had opted to redirect any animosity towards Lucas Sinclair by necessity. But now he kind of hated him again.

Max had beaten him. Fair was fair.

Billy had beaten Steve Harrington and still managed to lose.

Billy finished his cigarette and turned up the radio before he left the lot and started driving to nowhere.

His head hurt and the cold made his fingers hurt even when he wore gloves.

He drove eighty, drumming the steering wheel with one hand, flicking his Zippo with the other.

His dad had taken to bugging him about joining the military after high school. Further a thought could not be from Billy's mind, but he knew his dad. That demand wasn't going to go anywhere.

He knew well enough that he couldn't be forced to join shit once he turned eighteen. But his dad could take the car which he'd half paid for and he could kick Billy out before he got his bearings after graduation. Billy knew he could make it on his own if he needed to, even without any help. he was sure he *could* if he needed to, but the prospect made him feel cold and dark inside.

Alone.

He didn't like to cop to shit like that.

He pressed his foot to the gas.

"NAH NAAAH NA NANANANANA!" He sang to the blaring music and almost missed the siren behind him.

"Fuck!"

The cop's name was Callahan and he looked like an idiot. When Billy snatched the ticket out of his hand, he nearly ripped it.

"Hey, watch it," Callahan said.

"Yes, *sir*."

Billy parked off Kerley and got out of the car and smoked in the chill, zipping up his leather jacket. He hated the cold but he'd taken to

walking around the woods when he had shit all to do because it was still better than home. Now the crunch of snow and ice under his boots was calming, the puff of his breath mingling with smoke in front of him as he walked. The silence of it all was a jolt after the music, yet it was also loud in a way that put him in a strange mood.

Nothing had actually changed but everything *felt* different.

Except that he couldn't hassle Harrington because Harrington's face had been fucked up for weeks and Billy couldn't breathe when he looked at Steve but he still kept looking at him. And he couldn't hassle Max because Max had won and he knew it and part of him was glad.

He was sucking at basketball too and that was bothering him more than his aching head.

When he played basketball, he had to look at Steve Harrington and be near Steve Harrington and the little human noises he made as he played, and see Steve Harrington's loping walk as he caught his breath after a game, pulling at his shirt, casting side-eyed glances at Billy like Billy might explode at any moment. He didn't seem afraid, Billy knew too well what fear of a person looked like if only because he'd lived with it himself for so long. Steve just seemed *alert*. Steve Harrington was no fighter but Billy was pretty sure he'd go at Billy and get his ass kicked *again* if he thought it was for a good reason.

At ten to eight, Billy crunched back through the snow to his car and sped to the arcade where Max was waiting. When she got in the car, she had the ghost of a smile on her face and whatever hostile energy Billy was likely giving off wasn't enough to take it away as she gazed out the window at winter.

And again, part of him hated her for it, and part of him was glad.

Maybe the cold had cleared his head or calmed him down, but Billy found himself, as he gripped the wheel and drove them home, saying, "Have fun?"

Max looked at him askance and said, “Why?”

“Just asking,” Billy said with a shrug.

She tensed up, he could practically feel it as her gaze returned to the window.

“Fine,” Billy said. “Fuck you too.”

They were nearly home when she finally spoke again. “Do you remember when Neil was gone for two weeks the first summer they got married? And you took me to see *E.T.*...?”

Billy watched the road as he drove.

“And we went to the beach a bunch of times,” Max continued, as he pulled up to the house. “Just you and I. And the pool at the Y, even though you always bitched about the kids there. Your hair turned green and you were so pissed, except you were funny about it, it wasn’t like... And then the last day we came back from the beach Neil had come home and he was yelling at my mom and you didn’t even say anything, you just turned me around and we walked down to Foster’s Freeze and you bought us a banana split. You remember that?”

Snow was falling outside the car. He felt a twisting in his gut, it was tight, just the way it felt when he knew his dad was in a bad mood.

“And after that, when he was home again you were...” She sniffed and shook her head. “It was like none of it happened. It was like you tricked me.”

Billy let the engine idle.

“You won’t ever trick me again,” she said, and got out of the car, slamming the door so hard he thought he heard an echo.

Billy felt like shit the next day, his stomach still tight even though

there was nothing immediately wrong. In gym he played like shit, and he felt Harrington's eyes on him, *everyone's* eyes on him, probably because he wasn't talking trash or bothering with an aggressive offense or an offense of any kind really.

"Where's your head at, Hargrove?" Coach Krug said.

Billy only glared at him and stood, catching his breath, a string of obscenities on the tip of his tongue that would get him sent to the Principal's Office which would only end in him being shoved against the bookshelf again and probably smacked.

The guys were all mumbling about the game as they loitered on the court and Billy could practically feel Tommy's smirk.

"Hey." The word was barely uttered. Billy heard Steve behind him just before he passed and, as he did so, he touched Billy's back, just above the waistband of his gym shorts, with three fingers. It was a casual touch, the kind of thing that was almost unintentional as you walked by somebody, just getting your bearings, but Billy *felt* it, every bit of it, the tips of Steve's fingers touching his lower back and then just the meat of his palm, quick, light, but Billy inhaled, and he smelled Steve's sweat and heard him breathing, thought he felt Steve's hair touch his cheek as he passed, their shoulders brushing. Then Steve Harrington's fingers were gone and everyone's voices sounded too loud.

Billy showered as far away from the other boys as he could get and then it was lunch.

"What crawled up your ass and died?" Tommy was both grinning like an idiot and chewing with his mouth open.

"Nothing," Billy mumbled. "Feel like shit today."

"Well, you played like a bitch," Tommy said. "Harrington wiped the floor with you."

The other boy's laughed but the glare Billy threw them made them look away, nervous. Except for Tommy, who kept going: "I dunno, man, maybe you need to teach Harrington a lesson again. Show em'

who's king. 'Less you're gonna keep playing like a homo..."

The word "homo" didn't even register, although it could have given the number of times his father had used it just before shoving him, but for whatever reason the notion that he should beat the shit out of Harrington again got Billy to his feet and grabbing Tommy by the hair from across the table and he slammed Tommy's face into his own tray of tuna fish sandwich which toppled a Dr. Pepper that spilled across the table. Tommy yelped and everyone hooted as Billy leaned down to hiss in his ear.

"Shut your fucking mouth before I teach you the same lesson I taught him, shithead."

Billy wanted to do it anyway; climb over and knock out Tommy's teeth just because his heated blood was already making his stomach's knots come undone, but then there was a hand yanking his arm, pulling him away, and he twisted around to see Steve Harrington standing there with his stupid pretty brown eyes, watching him.

"Fight!" Somebody shouted, and people laughed.

"Don't do it, man," Steve said.

Billy yanked his arm away and Steve flinched back, just slightly, tensed, not afraid but ready just like Billy knew he would be. But Billy only stalked out of the cafeteria to the sounds of disappointed booing by the peanut gallery who had lost an opportunity for entertainment.

That Steve could stop him and succeed without Billy pounding his face in again plagued him as he stomped into the hall and started to light a cigarette before he remembered to go outside and under the bleachers. He hid there until the end of lunch, shaking with anger at Tommy and Max and his father and Steve fucking Harrington's stupid pretty brown eyes.

After school, Billy avoided Harrington's gaze from across the parking lot and waited for Max, letting the engine idle. They didn't speak on the way home where Billy did his chores and homework with the requisite amount of "respect and responsibility" necessary. Neil must've been in a good mood because he didn't seem to mind when

Billy went out again, muttering about meeting a girl.

He drove out to the woods off Kerley, to the same spot. He could've gone anywhere, he supposed but he'd liked this spot, even in the cutting cold and even given the way the snow and ice crunched under his boots and made him miss the burn of soft sand in July.

He did remember those two weeks of summer without Neil. He'd had a boogie board he'd bought on impulse and didn't use much, but Max had. He remembered watching her laughing in the waves, red mermaid hair whipping around as she tumbled in the water. He'd thought how fucking weird it was to suddenly have a sister and felt a surge of fear that Neil might hurt her too. Then Neil had come home and Max had remained safe and all Billy could think was: *Fuck her.*

He needed a new coat.

It was dark and dark in Hawkins was darker than he was used to.. He didn't go too far but stayed on the familiar bit of a path he'd trampled down before. He was getting used to particular trees. He smoked and even in the silence there was a sort of a hum to the woods, the wind between the trees he supposed, chill and biting him again. He was starting to get used to that too.

He needed a scarf. He at least needed to button all the way up. He'd let just one button go that day, but he wore a hooded sweatshirt under his jacket. He felt the icy metal of his mother's necklace on his chest.

He nearly ate shit.

It was not the quarry, but he did find himself overlooking a small ravine into darkness and who knew what was down there, ice and rocks most likely and that was enough to kill a guy. But the moon was bright now, lighting his way so that he didn't step into nothing at the last second. He smoked and turned around, looking back at his footsteps through the snow. He leaned against a tree, icy and unforgiving.

Abruptly he burst into tears.

His mother had been Catholic. She had not been a very motivated Catholic but Billy had scattershot knowledge of sacraments and Good Friday and the Passion. She'd dragged him down to Mass on the important days or just on a whim if Neil was making them especially miserable, promising to take him to the beach afterwards if he was good as she dropped a dollar in the donation box and lit a candle to pray to the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, Mary, saints... He'd been fuzzy on who actually caught the prayers, it seemed like a lot of people. The Catholic stuff seemed normal because it had always been there somewhere on his periphery even if his father always talked shit about it. Billy inwardly took his mother's side in it because his mother's side was not his father's.

But after his mother had died he decided all that shit was a total con.

"Hey asshole!" Billy yelled at the trees, at God, he supposed. His cheeks stung with cold where hot tears had fallen now chilled. "Hey FUCKER. You listening, asshole? FUCK YOU! FUCK this bullshit-" His voice cracked and his fist met a tree, a sharp pain lancing through his knuckles as they hit the icy wood. He cried out and punched the tree again before he could think about it. He was going to break the skin if he punched again, and he punched. He held his wrist, his blood sang, as painful as it was. He would break his hand.

"Don't."

For a fleeting second he thought Steve Harrington was standing behind him, but it was a girl's voice.

Don't do it, man.

He saw no one.

Nobody tells me what to do, he thought. He should have said it to Steve and punched that soft face with those eyes that were way too big. He should have been wondering who had just spoken but his mind was a riot. Maybe nobody had spoken and he was going nuts. He punched the tree again, letting out a sharp cry, and then the world spun around him. He was being pushed--no--pulled, backwards with great force. *Thrown*, that was it. Snow and icy wind and trees all around him... He was thrown backwards and he landed in a heap of

snow, the air knocked out of him. He lay there, stunned, freezing, his hand throbbing in pain and the moonlight showed on a small figure who approached.

Billy blinked. He'd died, he thought. He'd fallen into the ravine or his father had killed him a long time ago.

The little shape loomed over him as he lay in the snow. It was hooded. He saw the silhouette of small hands. It looked like a girl, though he could not see her face with the moon behind her. The curls of her short hair were sharp in the light of the moon.

"Don't. Don't hurt."

"What... What the fuck—"

"Don't...*hurt* yourself. Stop!"

Her breath steamed in the cold. And then she walked away, seeming to disappear into the trees.

Billy lay in the snow for full minutes until he started to go numb. He stared up at the stars and the huge moon over the woods.

The girl had *thrown* him.

He was pretty sure.

A young girl, hooded, who had appeared as if by magic while he had been yelling at God, and who had somehow thrown him with great force across the forest...

Billy fidgeted with his mother's old scapular of Holy Mary the Mother of God that he wore on a chain around his neck.

"What the *fuck*."

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy has a very long day.

Billy lay in the snow breathing.

When he stood up he stumbled back again, lightheaded.

“What the hell.”

He whipped around, looking for any sign of the figure, the...ghost? Holy Mary Mother of God?

His mother had mentioned stories of people having weird “encounters” with spiritual beings; angels, saints, Mary... Even she had thought that was all baloney. But then... *what the hell had it been?* Some kind of supernatural force had stopped him from hurting himself.

“Losing my goddamn mind.”

There was nobody, only him in the moonlight and he started to walk back to his car trying to sort out what had just happened. He couldn’t find a reasonable explanation no matter how he looked at it. Something had *thrown* him, that was the only way to put it. And that in itself was impossible. People didn’t just fly through the air like that. He was also positive that the small figure shaped like a kid about Max’s size had made it happen.

His heart was racing and it wouldn’t stop.

In the safety and familiarity of his car, he tried to shove the whole thing to the back of his mind, cranked up some tunes, and sped home, which was made more complicated because he’d definitely injured his hand. The car reeked of smoke and that settled him a little, that was reality.

But the memory wouldn't leave.

Something had *happened*.

On the way home he stopped at the drugstore and bought himself some bandages and tape. He taped up his shaking and swollen hand in the car, gritting his teeth, ignoring a few stray looks from passersby on Hawkins' main drag. The town was too small.

That night he lay in bed and for once he couldn't bring himself to jerk off thinking off Steve Harrington. All he could think about was that mysterious entity, whatever it had been, who had cared enough to make him stop for some reason. But as he dropped off he thought of how Steve had also made him stop and he dreamed of those stupid pretty brown eyes and falling snow.

Max didn't speak to him on the way to school the next morning, so Billy didn't speak either. He'd bypassed breakfast, not wanting Susan or his father to see his hand. They would think he'd been in a fight. He was at least relieved that he'd used his right hand, instead of his left. Except that he played right, so basketball was out of the question. He'd have played through the pain but that would just attract the sort of attention he didn't want.

When Billy saw Steve at school all his blood felt like it went hot and then cool at once. He'd never been so hung up on anyone. Steve was talking to Danny Scott, who was not unattractive in a pinch. For a dumb second Billy wondered if Steve liked Danny Scott and wanted to break something and they were only *talking*, besides which, as far as Billy knew, Steve just liked girls. Well, he was jealous of them too. He hated anyone on the receiving end of an easy smile from Steve Harrington and the girls most of all. They had nothing to hide. They had also never punched Harrington in the face.

In the hallway, Steve's gaze drifted over to him and he saw the bandaged hand and frowned.

Fuck you, Billy thought.

His hand felt huge and it throbbed, each pulse of blood a reminder of all the bullshit. He ignored Harrington and went to his locker,

thinking of Holy Mary, or whoever she was. In the clear light of day it all seemed too unreal. Maybe he'd *fallen* back into the snow and imagined the whole thing.

Don't.

Don't do it, man.

Steve had frowned at his hand. Did Steve *care*? And if he did, then why? It made sense that he'd stopped Billy from fighting Tommy (even if it was Tommy), he always seemed to be saving people.

He thinks you got in a fight, Billy thought. He thinks you hurt somebody.

He didn't want to care what Steve thought of him, but all at once he did and he cared so much he wanted to ditch and walk around the woods and look for Holy Mary.

He had a flask of vodka stashed in his locker. When nobody was looking, he threw back a quarter of it and went to class buzzed. He felt a degree better but then he had to sit behind Steve in English. Steve had trimmed his hair, Billy noticed. Not much, but it'd been curling over his collar and now there was a band of neck visible and Billy thought of kissing it, of standing behind Steve and bringing his hands up under Steve's arms to clutch his chest, kissing his neck, hard against him-

"Billy Hargrove." Mrs. Schatz glowered at him. "I don't think you're with us."

Billy watched Steve scratch his neck and wondered if there was a chance Steve somehow knew exactly what he had been thinking because after all, a girl had thrown him across the forest the night before. He was pretty sure...

Billy smiled his most charming smile and said, "Thoreau. Transcendentalism. *Sucking* the...marrow out of life." The class tittered at that.

Mrs. Schatz darkly said, "Close enough."

Steve Harrington looked over his shoulder at him and Billy couldn't

guess what his expression meant but his eyes were big and brown, his lashes dark and long. Billy's stomach twisted.

At lunch Billy took his flask to the bleachers and got wasted.

While wasted it suddenly seemed like a good idea to apologize to Steve Harrington, just so that Harrington might think he wasn't a total piece of shit maybe. After some vodka, it also sounded like what Holy Mary would want him to do and in his drunken mind, Holy Mary had his mother's face. He couldn't do it in person, that would just be humiliating. He didn't even consider it.

He was swaying as he stood under the bleachers, shuddering in his thermal and leather jacket. No rational person would be hanging out under the bleachers in the dead of winter, but that made it a good hiding place. He took his beat up Mead and a chewed on Bic out of his book-bag. He breathed in and out, propping the notebook on his knee, holding it awkwardly with his injured hand.

Sorry I fucked you up.

Should he say something else? How he'd zeroed in on the golden boy at school and played King of the Mountain while simultaneously thinking that this guy was a shitty excuse for a golden boy and how the fact of that made Steve all the more compelling in a way that had Billy wanting to punch him and also shove him against a wall and be inside him? That he thought of Steve's eyes too much when he could be thinking about his dick at least? How he wished he could start over, trick Steve into thinking he was almost a good person, maybe even worth something, like he'd once tricked Max? Was there anyway to write this note that could make Steve Harrington think he wasn't just *bad*?

He scrawled *B.H.* at the bottom and folded the note up, shoving it in his pocket. He was drunk at school. He had to be careful or he'd get in real trouble. He drank some water at a fountain, splashing it on his face as the bell rang for the end of lunch. He found Steve's locker before Steve did, number 17. If he'd tried he could've caught the combination by now. He stuffed the note in Steve's locker and bumped into three people as he strode down the hall, pretending to be sober.

In fifth period, Billy laid low and conjugated some French, though it was probably gibberish.

Sixth period was Economics with Harrington and Billy wished he wasn't already nearly sober because Steve was staring at him intensely.

Billy kept his eyes on his Mead notebook and drew Holy Mary, except she was a little more comic bookish in a flowing hooded cloak instead of the jacket he thought she had been wearing, the curls of her hair looked a little angrier, and there was both lightning and falling snow behind her. He gave her his mother's face as well as he could draw it on the fly with a Bic. He drew a bubble above her head that said: "DON'T!"

"Group projects," Mr. Van Der Hauten said as he passed out a packet. "You'll be writing up a budget and business plan for your own company... I'm pairing you up. We'll just go alphabetical here, folks."

Oh fuck.

Billy tapped his pen, his stomach knotting up, Steve's eyes on him.

"Hargrove, you're with Harrington."

Billy flipped the page over and sighed heavily, and Steve was already moving over as kids shuffled around the room. His sobering mind now realized how incredibly stupid it had been to write Steve Harrington an apology at all much less in the middle of a school day.

"What happened to your hand?" Steve said. They'd moved the desks around so that the project partners could face each other.

Shit. He hadn't even bothered to come up with a convincing lie.

Harrington was looking at him like he was a puppy lost in the rain. Which was very stupid of Steve, Billy thought.

"Closed my hand on a door," Billy said, hiding hand under the desk. "Car door."

"Got your note..." Steve said quietly.

“Right. Whatever,” Billy said. “Just...project? You want to do the budget or the plan?”

“I’m better with math,” Steve said. He was looking at Billy like he wanted something and that annoyed him. He’d already apologized, what more could Steve expect now?

“Fine, the budget.”

“We should meet tonight,” Steve said.

“Why don’t we just-”

“The budget ties with the plan so... and we have to present it. We’re gonna need to meet.”

Billy decided he would agree to meet with Steve and then ditch him.

“Your house.”

“Okay,” Steve said brightly. “Six?”

“Yeah. Fine.”

Steve seemed way too cheerful about the whole thing and that just confused Billy. It made him nervous as hell and he glared at his notebook, wanting to draw another Holy Mary just to distract himself. He chewed on the end of his Bic, ignoring his knee under the desk bumping up against Harrington’s. He made a show of studying the packet and took some notes on how he would write the business plan, but it was all bullshit. Anyway, the project only felt like busy work, the kind of thing that would take him about fifteen minutes to write up competently enough for at least a C+. He was tense for the rest of the class, as Steve sat there always looking like he was about to ask Billy for some further explanation. The bell rang and Billy bolted.

After school, Billy was supposed to take Max home but in the car she was giving him a hard look, twisting her green snow hat in her hand.

“Can you take me to the arcade instead?” Max said. “I won’t stay long. I can get a ride home with Lucas or Dustin.”

Billy sucked on his cigarette. It wasn't the plan, it meant two arcade days in a row which both Susan and his father didn't love. His father might say nothing or he might get mad. He was unpredictable that way. There was absolutely no reason not to tell Max to shut up, that he was taking her home. The stupid thing was, he hesitated. He let the engine idle, tapping his thumbs on the wheel. Since she'd brought up those two weeks in the of summer in 1982, he couldn't help but think of them now; Max laughing in the waves.

The cold was biting but Billy thought of standing in a long line for *E.T.* in the ninety-five degree heat, Max bouncing in her flip-flops beside him as he told her stupid jokes. She'd been eating Pop Rocks like crazy that whole summer. She kept sticking out her tongue to make him hear the crystals crackling.

Don't.

Why had he let his father take away everything good?

The truth of that thought felt like thunder. Billy stared out at the snow.

Max started to say, "I only have one assignment and it's so easy."

"Sure," Billy said.

Max looked surprised but she shut her mouth, probably not wanting to risk him changing his mind. At the arcade, Billy watched Lucas's father give him money again and on impulse he reached into his front pocket and found a load of change.

"Here." He held out his hand full of quarters and Max just stared at it, suspicious. "You hate my guts, I get it. Just go play your Dig Dugs or whatever."

Max took the change because it was after all, arcade gold, and in a second she was grinning at Lucas, tromping through the snow. Mr. Sinclair stood by his car, Lucas's little sister bouncing in the front seat. He saw Billy and gave him a nod. Billy only lit himself another cigarette and peeled out of the lot.

He wanted to walk in the snowy woods and see if Holy Mary would

make an appearance. Unless he was crazy which was also on the table. But he'd planned on ditching Steve which meant he had to at least start the stupid Econ. project.

Susan was out when Billy got home. Billy's stomach felt tight, but at least he knew why.

"Where's Maxine?"

He was barely in the door before his father asked, hollering from the kitchen table. Billy dropped his jacket in his room and took a breath, running his hands through his hair as he made his way back down the hall.

"I dropped her at the arcade," Billy said. "She won't stay long. Get a ride back."

In the kitchen he acted more relaxed than he felt, grabbing a Coke from the fridge. He popped his soda open and took a sip, leaning on the sink. His father sat at the table in front of a pile of paperwork.

"You know she's not supposed to go to the arcade more than a couple times in a week," Neil said.

"Yeah, I know. She didn't have any homework." That sounded better than saying she had a little. "She's only been once this week."

"No more arcade for the rest of the week," Neil said.

"Right." Billy nodded and his father went back to his paperwork. Billy felt a degree more relaxed and if he'd left right then instead of standing there sipping his Coke, feeling like he'd gotten away with something, it might've gone differently.

"Do you know the Sinclairs?" His father.

Billy's stomach clenched like a fist and he said. "Don't think so."

"Susan and I ran into them at the market," his father said, twisting around in his chair to look up at Billy. "Whole...family. Said Lucas is good friends with Max?"

"Maybe she is." Billy shrugged and took a sip of Coke."I wouldn't know."

Billy immediately realized first; that was the wrong thing to say, and second; there was no right thing to say.

"You wouldn't know," his father said, and stood.

Shit.

"I let have you have that ridiculous hair," his father said. "And that faggot earring. I let you get away with a lot, don't I?"

"Yes, sir." He stared down at his Coke, at a drop of soda resting on the tip of finger. He focussed on that.

"Look at me when I talk to you." He was always so calm.

Billy looked at him, staying steady.

"I let you get away with a lot," Neil said. "Because I know as well as you do that there's something very *wrong* with you. I can only fix so much. You follow my rules, show me that you're a responsible person, a good son, a good brother...then maybe you're not completely hopeless."

"I'm not," Billy said.

Neil grabbed Billy's chin in his hand hard enough to bruise, forcing Billy to look at him. "Your mother was soft on you. I can't be. You're not going to amount to anything if you don't obey. Right?"

"Yes, sir," Billy said.

"Now I charged you with keeping an eye on Max. And I don't want her hanging around those people-"

"Dad-"

Neil's fingers dug into his throat. "I said I don't want her hanging around those people."

“Okay-”

“What was that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t always be there,” his father said. “We’re a family. So we look out for each other, don’t we?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He let Billy go with a rough twist of his arm and Billy caught his breath, rubbing his jaw.

“They ruin a neighborhood,” his father muttered as he stepped away.

Don’t.

He thought of Mr. Sinclair in his coat, rubbing his son’s head.

“You’re full of shit,” Billy said.

The blow was deliberate, because Neil was always deliberate. Short and sharp, a backhand, which wouldn’t have been so bad except that Neil happened to be wearing his U.S. Army ring and it caught Billy right under his eye. Billy hissed and his father grabbed his chin again.

“You *don’t* speak to me that way. You apologize.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sir.”

“Sir.”

“You’re worthless, Billy, but I’m trying to help you. I’m really trying. Do you believe me?”

Billy nodded in his hand and Neil let him go and sat down at the table, going back to his paperwork like it was all nothing.

“I have a group project for Econ.,” Billy said in a rush. “I have to meet with the group. I can show you the packet if you-”

“Just go.” Neil waved a hand, dismissing him. “Not too late.”

“Yes, sir,” he mumbled yet again, and went to his room to grab his jacket and his book-bag. His eye stung, he could feel it starting to swell a little.

The cold felt like relief when he went out and snow was falling lightly. Billy didn’t break down until he was safe inside his car and then he pounded his dashboard. He hit his bad hand and cried out, wiping away angry tears. He rubbed his face and sniffed and backed out, heading for Harrington’s even though it was way too early. He stopped on the way and bought cigarettes and smoked in the car awhile. His eye didn’t look bad but it was going to bruise. His hand on the other hand...

Neil hadn’t seemed to notice it. Which was an oversight on his part. Billy was surprised he hadn’t asked if there’d been a fight. If he tried he could flex his fingers a little so he didn’t think it was broken but it hurt like hell. He drove to Harrington’s and parked nearby without heading up the drive. He had time to kill now and nothing to do. He should’ve gone to the woods, he thought.

It was barely five o’clock.

He couldn’t just let the engine go and run down the battery but the car got cold quick and it was miserable to sit in the quiet with only his thoughts and the pain of his injuries. He gave up after fifteen minutes and drove up the Harrington’s drive, the specter of a near mansion only making him feel worse. He was parked right behind Steve’s BMW and a silver Mercedes.

He wasn’t parked for five minutes before Steve Harrington himself appeared, shutting the front door behind him and traipsing down the snowy walk in an overcoat over a t-shirt and jeans, lapels flapping in a gust of wind, his hair blowing around.

Steve walked all the way out to the Camaro and Billy couldn’t react before he was tapping on the driver’s window. Billy opened the door, shivering from the chill.

“You gonna...sit out here all night or...?” Steve said.

Billy grabbed his book-bag and got out of the car and Steve stood there a moment, hands in his coat pockets, looking at him. "You're early."

"Got better things to do?" Billy said.

Steve shrugged and said, "Not today."

Billy followed him into the house and it was quiet but he could hear a TV on in another room. Steve hung his coat up and nodded at Billy for his jacket. In the kitchen Billy leaned against the counter and dropped his bag. His eye hurt less out of the cold, but it felt *big* and he had an urge to touch it. He was still edgy and restless from the fight with his dad and he absently shifted from foot to foot, drumming his fingers, staring at his bandaged hand.

"You want something to drink?" Steve loitered by a big steel fridge.

"Whiskey would be good," Billy muttered.

"I was thinking like a Coke."

"Yeah sure."

Steve slid a can of Coke down the counter, watching Billy with his big brown eyes. He wore a coffee colored sweater that made them yet bigger in the low light of the kitchen. Billy chewed his lip, practically vibrating with nervous energy.

"Fucked up your eye," Steve said.

He hadn't thought it was visible and his jaw twitched. "Real observant, Harrington. You should be a detective."

"Get in a fight?" Steve took a long drink of his Coke and Billy watched his throat working.

"Ya know, my mom's dead, but I don't need another one."

"Right." Steve leaned on his arms across from Billy so he was forced was to stand there, inches away, at the mercy of those eyes. "You don't need anyone, do you?"

Billy was back on his heels. Steve was playing at something he had not been expecting in the least and it made him dizzy, made his skin hot. And coming from everything in his life the past few days, he felt he'd been stripped of his skin. Steve wasn't breaking eye contact and Billy wouldn't break on principle so they stood sipping their cokes, silently gazing until Billy saw the corners of Steve's mouth turn up.

"We should get to work, I guess," Steve said, as if they hadn't just been deliberately eye-fucking each other or fighting for the top again, he wasn't sure which.

Steve led Billy up to his room and plopped down on the bed and Billy wandered around the place with its hideous plaid wallpaper. He inspected a pile of cassettes on a dresser. He couldn't keep still.

"I haven't done anything yet," Steve said, throwing open his Trapper Keeper.

"It's easy," Billy said, shrugging. "There's a template in the back of the book. Just copy that with different figures. Ring it up."

"Yeah."

Billy paced the room, rubbing his arms. "What's our company called? Supposed to name it."

Steve sat on his leg, playing with a retractable pen. "Bag of Dicks Emporium."

Billy blurted a laugh and couldn't help but grin. "You're an idiot."

"You're more...studious than I thought you'd be," Steve said.

He's thinking about me?

"Well, don't assume shit then," Billy said. He was down to a grey thermal and it felt much too warm suddenly. He scratched his stomach, stuck his tongue between his teeth, flashing on an image of pushing Steve down on the bed, sucking on his bottom lip.

"Sit down, will ya? You'll wear a hole in the rug."

Billy surveyed the chair at Steve's neat little desk and the big bed where Steve sat back against the pillows. He shifted on his feet and opted for the edge of the bed, fidgeting with a little flap of his bandage coming undone.

"What kinda grades do you get anyway?" Steve said, flipping through his Econ book.

"If I hit a B average my dad stays off my back," Billy said, flexing his hurt fingers a little. "Usually shoot for that. Doesn't take much."

Steve murmured, "I always did like the smart ones."

In Billy's experience, immediately good things were not to be trusted. At best you could exploit them in the short term because they would inevitably be taken away. Steve was different. He didn't think he could handle being given Steve and losing him. He didn't process this consciously but he felt a spike of fear as Steve met his eyes.

"Harrington, what the hell is this?"

"Jesus Christ," Steve muttered, and shut his book. "The note!"

"What *about* the note?"

"We're just going to act like you didn't..." Steve waved his arms around vaguely.

"Didn't what?" Billy said. "I apologized. Let's not make a federal case out of it."

"And..." Steve said.

"And *what*? Christ, Harrington. Starting to wish I hadn't bothered. I was wasted when I wrote that."

Steve snorted a laugh. "Okay. Well, that would figure. You don't remember what you wrote, do you?"

Billy's blood ran cold and he tapped his foot on the floor. "What're you talking about?"

“What do you think you said?”

“I said I was sorry. That’s it.”

“Huh.” Steve reached into his back pocket and took out the note, folded up small, still raggedy where Billy had torn it out of his notebook. It looked like it had been folded and refolded excessively. He handed it to Billy without a word.

The note read:

Sorry I fucked you up. I really like you a lot. Wish we could start over.

-B.H.

“A lot” was underlined. Twice.

I really like you a lot.

As if he were twelve.

“I...” He licked his lips. “I was *drunk*.”

“Yeah, in my experience people usually say what they mean when they’re drunk.”

“I was...joking, I can’t believe you’re taking this seriously-”

“You were drunk or you were joking?”

Billy crumpled up the note in his hand. “Really playing with fire here, Harrington. How do you know I’m not gonna knock you on your ass right now?”

Steve’s moved over on the bed so he was sitting next to Billy. Billy could’ve counted his eyelashes. “You won’t.”

“How the hell do you know that?” Billy said, hating himself for how raw he sounded.

“Because,” Steve said, “you’re staring at my mouth right now.” He kissed Billy firmly and Billy felt himself melting. Steve Harrington had *full* lips, soft lips, and once more they belonged to *Steve*

Harrington. Billy felt like a damn girl or what he imagined any damn girl would feel like at Steve Harrington's mercy, especially when Billy's lips parted and Steve's tongue met his, a warm hand coming up to cradle his cheek right where his father had just been digging in to hurt him. Steve pulled away, a funny smile on his face, and Billy leaned forward, their noses brushing. Steve's hand was in his hair. Steve was kissing his cheek and the corner of his jaw and Billy couldn't think, he only breathed, falling apart. Steve kissed the bruise forming under his eye and Billy wasn't sure if his heart was coming together or breaking again.

"How 'bout it?" Steve said. "Start over?"

"Let's start right here," Billy said, and kissed Steve well enough to make him see the same stars he saw, pushing him back onto the bed.

3. Chapter 3

The euphoria of Billy's night with Steve was short-lived.

He went home light as air, every problem shoved to the back of his mind. The fight with his father was nothing compared to the magic of Steve kissing him and a long session of rolling around in his bed, learning the tastes of each other's mouths.

When he woke up in the morning, the first thing he thought of was the feel of holding Steve in his arms, the sensation of Steve's breath and tongue hot in the crook of his neck.

Steve.

But in the morning as Max was getting ready for school Billy's father appeared in his doorway.

"Don't forget what we talked about," his father said.

Shit.

Billy threw on a thermal and a denim shirt, stifled by all the layers. He took too long getting ready, avoiding the inevitable. Fuck Max and her little *E.T.* speech, he thought. It had messed with his head. It was still messing with his head. The thought of making Max stay away from Lucas made him feel sick now, even without the threat of a nail bat over his nuts. Doing nothing was not an option. He had to at least try or there would be consequences. He supposed there was a possibility of somehow negotiating things with Max. Hawkins was a small town. If Max was hanging out with Lucas, his father would be finding out about it from somewhere.

The whole thing was stupid. The way his father felt about "those people" had always been something Billy had no compunction about going along with for survival's sake. It didn't *mean* anything from his point of view. Anyway, it wasn't as if there hadn't been black people in California. Billy had partied with all kinds of people, he just didn't

take them home. He hadn't taken anyone home if he could avoid it. He'd had black sexual partners too and then gone home and nodded along the very next day when his father talked about "the gang problem" in a way that meant something very specific.

He thought about Mr. Sinclair in his coat and Lucas's little sister in the front seat and Max's intense desire to have Lucas for a friend or a boyfriend or whatever it was and he felt a like a brainless coward.

Now in the car with Max, who was humming cheerfully, he felt like an even bigger coward, but he saw no getting around it. He wondered if he could couch it in a way that she would understand.

"We have to talk about something," Billy said. And just beginning to approach the subject, dread settled over him as he pulled into the school parking lot.

"What?" Max said, and she was immediately wary.

"My *father* said," Billy began, "you can't..."

"I can't what?"

"You can't hang out with Lucas Sinclair--"

"NO." Max said. "You said you wouldn't do this again. You promised, asshole--"

"I'm not doing it, Max."

"Like hell!"

"He told me to tell you so I'm telling you," Billy said.

"Why wouldn't he tell me that himself?" She scowled at him.

"He thinks... I don't know. He thinks if I'm in charge of you I'll be...different or...responsible. I don't know, can you just do this for me?"

"What's *wrong* with you!"

“Max.” Billy shut his eyes. He was getting angry about the whole storm of shit, though for once his anger was directed squarely at his father.

“And you couldn’t stand up to him?” Max said. “You couldn’t say something-”

“I tried! I did. You can’t... He’ll know and *I’ll* catch hell. Look at my fucking eye, Max!”

“You’re a liar! You promised!” She punched him hard in the shoulder and he saw her tearing up. “Liar!”

“I didn’t lie!”

“He’s my friend!” She punched him again and again and hit his sore hand and he gasped slightly gripping the steering wheel. “You don’t know what friends are because you’re a piece of shit! You lying asshole! Piece of shit!”

Max was crying as she pummeled Billy who sat there, taking it.

“I’m sorry,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Fuck you, Billy,” Max said, as she opened the door. “Burn in *hell*.”

She slammed the door and went off sobbing to school and Billy wiped his eyes and sat hating himself and then his father and then himself again. Through the windshield he saw Steve Harrington watching Max as she stomped off in the snow, her backpack half falling off her shoulders, her fiery head in her hands. For a second he thought Steve was going to come talk to him. Instead he cast a backwards glance at the Camaro and made his way to the school.

Billy ran late but at his locker in the empty hall Steve found him as he was switching out his books.

“What’s wrong with Max?” Steve said.

“Nothing,” Billy said. “Just dumb girl stuff.”

“Dumb girl stuff,” Steve said. “She was bawling.”

Billy slammed his locker shut and turned around to face Steve. "What are you asking me?"

"Did you upset her?"

Billy laughed darkly. There was nothing funny about this at all. He could still feel the ghost of Steve's hands on his skin. "Actually, it's none of your business. Is it. Harrington."

"Man." Steve shook his head. "I thought you were... I thought you'd changed, dude. I really did."

He had a new ache, apart from the hand and his purpling eye. Billy's heart was shattering. Not that anyone could believe he had one. He wasn't about to tell Steve what had happened to his eye or how he'd hurt his hand. He couldn't begin to imagine it.

"Because I was such a...a worthless piece of shit before," Billy said, tripping on his words. "Not like the great King Steve, right? Guess I'm just trash, huh? Bad to the bone, not good enough for the king?"

"King Steve." Steve nodded and his mouth was tight. "You're an asshole, you know that?"

"And you're making me want to pound your face in again, *dude*."

"Right." Steve just walked away and over his shoulder he said. "Fuck you, Billy!"

"Go fuck yourself!" Billy bit out and he broke at the end but the hall was mercifully empty so nobody could see him when he threw his bag into the lockers, choking back tears.

Billy had no vodka in his flask left, so he opted to ditch school and go to the woods. He drove too fast but managed to escape a ticket, half hoping he'd just wreck the car, wreck himself, blow up everything. Would it be any worse really?

In the woods he kicked rocks and stomped on piles of frozen branches and resisted the urge to box with anymore trees.

“Mary!” Billy shouted into the silent trees. “Whatever you are! MAAAARY! Shit.”

Dumb shit, he thought. Screaming for some saint.

“I’LL PUNCH A FUCKING TREE AGAIN IF YOU DON’T SHOW YOUR ASS!”

He sat on a log and folded his arms, wiping his eyes. It was different being in the woods in the early morning. The sun was out. There was new fallen snow from the night before too and the woods were a blanket of white. It was beautiful and didn’t fit his mood at all. He tugged his jacket tight around him. His ears were cold. He played with the still unwinding piece of bandage. The whole thing would come undone soon.

“Fucked it all up.” He broke down and pressed his palms to his eyes. “Fucked it all up.”

He sat there for a while, feeling about as alone as he ever had and that was saying something.

He heard the crack of twigs breaking and sniffed, looking up to see Holy Mary in the clearing, only feet away. It had to be her, though he had never seen her face. But she didn’t look like any saint, she just looked like a girl, about Max’s age. She wore a white parka and overalls and boots all caked with snow and ice. She put her hood down and her breath steamed in the cold. She had a mop of brown curls. She didn’t anything look like his mother.

“It’s you,” Billy said.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” she said.

Billy took a long breath and sat up straight. He knew he was probably a human catastrophe but she didn’t seem phased. The biggest question that Billy found he didn’t so much care about at the moment was: How the hell had she thrown him into the air?

“I won’t,” Billy said.

He felt as if he were trying to get a deer not to bolt. He couldn’t think

of what to say to make the girl stay. But it seemed very important that she stay.

“Why did you hurt yourself?” The girl said, and came a little nearer. She nodded at his bandaged hand. He noticed that she had a stilted and slow way of speaking.

“I was...angry. I was really angry.”

“At yourself?”

“Nobody else to punch,” Billy said, and he smiled weakly.

“I get angry sometimes,” she said.

“Everybody gets angry sometimes,” Billy muttered.

“I get...very angry. Sometimes.” She looked at him and he believed her.

He wondered if she'd ever thrown somebody when she was angry. Billy sniffed and played with his bandage. It made no sense that he felt okay talking to this girl about feelings of all things. He didn't talk to anybody about shit like that. There was just something about her that made him think she understood him. Even if she wasn't a saint.

“What do you get angry about?” Billy said.

She looked around her, rubbing her lips together as if deciding what to do and then she came over and sat down next to Billy on the log.

“Bad people,” she said. “Who hurt me.”

The way she said it made Billy think it was worse than what he might be imagining. But he only said, “Your folks?”

She squinted at that, not understanding. And he said, “Your parents.”

“Papa,” she said softly.

“Yeah,” Billy said. He stared at his bandaged palm and rubbed his

wrist. "My papa's an asshole too."

She looked closely at him and tapped her eye.

"Yeah, my papa did that," he said, touching his eye.

"When I'm angry I can do bad things," the girl said. "Even...if I *want* to do good things."

"Guess it's a lot harder to do good things than bad," Billy said. "Especially if you're pissed all the time. Or if your *papa* is making you. Jesus..."

"Yes," she said. "I thought...it made me a monster."

"You?" He smiled, and shook his head. "Don't look like a monster. Bet you never hurt anybody who didn't deserve it."

"A little bit," she said, looking pained.

"I've done that a lot," Billy said. "If anyone's a monster, kid, it's me. Not you."

"If I'm not a monster," the girl said, "you're not a monster either."

Billy tried to hold it back but his shoulders shook and he hid behind his hand. He felt a little arm come around his back and the girl's curly head leaned against his shoulder. They sat like that for a while until Billy finally collected himself, and he wiped his eyes, smiling shyly.

"Sorry," Billy said.

The girl shook her head. "Why?"

"I...don't know." He shrugged, helpless. "You're a nice kid."

"So are you."

He laughed at that. "You have a name? Otherwise, I'm just calling you Snow Girl."

"I'm...Jane." She smiled and held out her hand a bit awkwardly as if

she'd practiced it a few times.

"Jane, I'm Billy." He shook her little hand. "You should probably get back to wherever it is you come from. Some fairy kingdom, I'm guessing."

She smiled at that. "Will you come to the woods again?"

"Yeah. Definitely."

"Good."

With that Jane made her way back into the trees, disappearing back into Never-Land. Billy sat on his log a while longer. Nothing had changed. But he felt...better. He felt better than he had even after Steve had kissed him, although it was an entirely different feeling, like weights had been taken off his shoulders. He walked to his car and sat in it smoking for a while. He didn't know what he would do. He was struck with a desire to take Max's side and tell his father to fuck off no matter the consequences yet it sounded even to him like a fantasy.

He fucked around doing nothing until four o'clock and then went to pick up Max.

In the car, Max proved icier than the woods and Billy glared out at the unforgiving winter as he drove them back to Cherry Road.

He scares the shit out of me and I don't know what to do.

He couldn't make himself say it.

"I wish I could change everything," he said in the quiet. He hadn't even been thinking it. It sounded strange coming out of his mouth.

"I don't believe anything you say," Max said. "I won't. Ever."

"I know." He stared out his window. "I just... I wish it could be like going to see *E.T.* But it's not."

“Stop it,” Max snapped. “Just stop talking!”

“I’m just trying to...” His mouth dropped open as, at a stop sign, Max opened her door and started running down the icy road. “Max! Dammit!”

He parked the car and went after her. They were California kids and barely used to walking on ice much less running on it and he couldn’t help but run much slower than he normally would for fear of eating shit.

“Max! Max, get back here!”

Her red hair flew around in the wind and he was just starting to catch up when he saw her foot slip and then she was falling hard on her arm with a sharp cry.

“*Shit.*” Billy ran off the road into the snowy grass of the woods where he didn’t have to worry about slick asphalt. When he caught up to her she was sitting on her leg and cradling her arm. She bit down hard on her lip, her face too white. He knelt down beside her and she turned from him, whimpering. “Just let me see,” he said. “C’mon.”

She twisted around, trembling. As gently as possible he pulled up the sleeve of her jacket.

Her arm did not look right.

“Christ,” Billy whispered. “You broke your fucking arm.”

Billy thought he might pass out.

“You broke your arm,” he said. “You broke your fucking arm.”

“It *hurts*,” she she said, and sounding too small.

Her arm was definitely a little crooked in the middle. He couldn’t unsee it. It wasn’t going anywhere.

“Okay,” he said. “Fuck. Okay.”

Billy had an urge to find an adult, which was not something he ever

had an urge to do normally. He realized he was the adult between the two of them and took a breath.

“We’re gonna take you to the hospital.”

“It hurts,” he said again, her eyes red. “It really hurts, it really hurts. *Billy.*”

“Okay okay.” He patted her back absently. “Just take a deep breath right now-”

“I can’t take a deep breath it hurts!”

“Just try right now, alright.” He turned to make her look at him. “Look at me. Breathe. Breathe in.”

Mas inhaled slowly, her expression twisted. He inhaled with her. “And breathe out.”

He nodded. “I’m gonna help you stand up. Then we’re gonna go to the hospital.”

He was helping her to a feet when he inwardly said ‘fuck it’ and swept her up into his arms, being careful not to hit her injury. She seemed smaller than she looked as he carried her, but she was being tough, refusing to cry, though her lip quivered. He walked carefully to the car, and his boots did have more grip than the slick soled Vans Max had stubbornly continued to wear in winter. He set her down gingerly in her seat, trying not to jostle her, but she still hissed and made pained little noises, and it was all making Billy’s head hurt.

Billy walked around to his side and got in and drove forward with a lurch, his mind racing.

“You have to turn around,” Max said.

“What. Why?”

“The hospital’s the other way,” Max grimaced as she adjusted her arm in her lap.

“Right.”

"It hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts," Max whispered.

Billy glanced at her as he drove, shocked by how much he wished he'd broken his arm instead of her.

She looked so pale.

"Max," Billy said, tapping his thumb on the steering wheel. "Do you remember...that time you were watching *Star Wars* with your mom when it was on TV. Remember? And...Susan had no idea what was going on. She thought...she thought Darth Vader was a robot. Remember that?" He licked his lips. He was trying to think of a distraction and it was the first thing he thought of.

"Yeah," Max said, her eyes squeezed shut. "What's that got to do with-"

"And...and you got that song stuck in your head," he smiled a little. "That dumb song from the bar on the sand planet-"

"Mos Eisley Cantina," Max said. "And it's Tatooine."

"Right," Billy said. "You know that 'cause you're a nerd, you know all the nerd things."

"That's what it's *called*."

"And you kept singing it over and over just to drive me nuts."

"It worked," she said. She took a deep breath. "You... You'd go in your room and play Black Sabbath."

"Yeah." He chuckled a little. "Right. How's it go?"

"How's what go?" Max said, making an "o" with her mouth to breathe, hunching over her arm.

"The song, the song," Billy said. "Isn't it like...Dun dun dun dun..."

"What...why..."

"C'mon. Dun dun dun dun...."

“Nah-nah-nah...” Max sang softly. “Dun nuh nuh nuh naa-naa.”

“Yeah,” Billy said. “That’s right. Like that. Keep going, keep going. Dun dun dun dun...”

“Nah-nah-nah...duh nuh nuh nuh naa-naaa.”

“Good.” Billy drummed his fingers and sang along with Max who, miraculously, seemed calmer and somehow less pained as she sang that awful song that had plagued Billy for weeks once. He kept it going all the way to the hospital, which seemed impossibly far, and kept it going as he parked at a bad diagonal near the emergency entrance.

Hawkins General wasn’t exactly bustling. The lobby of the ER was dead and Billy sat Max down and went up to the window where nobody was working. There was a bell and he pounded it with his palm several times, the loud clang echoing in the empty room

“HEY!” He shouted into the empty office behind the high counters. “Any doctors actually work here? My sister broke her arm! *Hello?*” He pounded on the bell until a nurse who looked like the old lady from *Murder She Wrote* appeared. She grabbed the bell before he could ring it again.

“Can you not do that?” she said. “Thank you. You need something, sir?”

“Yeah, I *need* something,” Billy said. “My sister broke her goddamn arm.”

“Okay.” She handed him a clipboard with a form attached to it. “Start filling this out. We’ll be right with you.”

“Outstanding,” Billy said flatly. He took the form and she rolled her eyes at him and disappeared around a corner.

He sat down next to Max with a huff. “We’re waiting.” He shook his head. “Place is completely dead and we’re sitting here waiting Unbelievable.” He started filling out the form, tapping his foot. Max watched him, still humming the *Star Wars* song.

He was surprised by how much he knew about Max.

“What’s your blood type?”

“I don’t know,” Max said.

“Wait, it’s O,” Billy said. “Susan once said you were a universal donor I think. Why the hell do I know that?”

“What’s your bloody type?” Max said.

“No idea.” The pen kept running out of ink and he shook it, continually glancing at the counter or at the door, impatient for somebody to appear. He sighed and went back to the form. “And...yes, you’re allergic to Penicillin.”

“I am?”

“You don’t remember getting strep? The medicine gave you hives. Also, you threw up on my boots.”

“They were ugly boots.”

He finished the form and stomped up to the counter, grunting in agitation when there was nobody to take it. He leaned over and left it pointedly on the messy desk behind the counter.

He slumped down next to Max again.

“How ya feelin’?” He said.

“Not great.”

“Yeah.” Billy’s hand hurt. His bandage was half unraveled and his knuckles ached. He pulled at the ragged end of the bandage and unwound it for something to do. His knuckles were red and purple. He was getting a tension headache. “He’s gonna kill me.”

“Who?” Max said. “Neil?”

“Pfft. Yeah.”

“Why? How’s this your fault?”

He laughed darkly and crossed his arms. "You really don't know anything."

"Know *what*?"

"Max."

"*What*?"

"What do you think happened to my eye?" He turned his head. It wasn't exactly a shiner but there was a bit of a bruise.

"I...I thought you got in a fight." Understanding washed over her face and she stared at him. "Neil hits you?"

"C'mon."

"I didn't know that."

He shrugged.

"I didn't *know* that. And you never told me."

"Would it have made any difference?"

She sat back, staring off at the scuffed linoleum. "I don't know."

"I told him he was full of shit," Billy said quietly. "He said to make you stop hanging out with Lucas, he was... doing what he does. I told him he was full of shit and he smacked me. He hit me that night before the Byers too. Ya know, *that* night. He hits me all the time but... I had a head full of steam about it that night. Since we got here really... Anyway. I know it doesn't mean anything. But...I'm sorry I'm a shitty brother."

Billy couldn't tell if Max was thinking about this or if she was totally ignoring him and then she said, "It means something."

Billy nodded and that was enough. He sat back, propping his chin on his hand and absently started humming that stupid song and Max hummed with him. She bobbed her head a little.

“Man, I hate that fucking song,” Billy mumbled.

She glanced at him and seeing his disgusted expression, she snorted a soft little laugh.

That was enough.

4. Chapter 4

Billy called home from the hospital after standing at a payphone for five minutes psyching himself up. Mercifully, Susan answered. He thought he made a valiant effort at making it sound like not a very big deal, but there was no getting around it. Max had broken her arm. Though Max herself seemed to think her cast was kind of badass and brightened when the doctor mentioned getting it signed by her friends. Susan didn't cry or yell or blame Billy. Instead there was a lot of silence on the line.

Then she said "I'll tell Neil for you."

Billy noted that and found it vaguely interesting.

When he hung up and returned to Max still perched atop a gurney and inspecting her cast, the doctor took one look at Billy's bad hand and said, "Let me take a look at that."

His hand was freshly bandaged and the doctor berated him for not getting it look at it sooner. He also took a look at Billy's eye but said the bruise wasn't too bad.

When they got home, Susan hovered over Max and asked a million questions. Billy's father sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. He didn't say anything and he didn't yell.

Billy found this terrifying.

Sometimes it was scarier when the thing you were afraid of *didn't* happen.

Billy plotted his moves. If he disappeared into his room it might look like he thought he was guilty of something. If he acted too casual, he might look careless.

Also, he was exhausted.

His default when he wasn't sure what to do was to get a Coke and lean against the sink, so he did that. They had missed dinner, and Susan was putting a plate together to take to Max's room. Billy

watched his father, sitting quietly at the table.

“What happened to your hand?” Neil said.

“Closed it in my car door,” Billy said. “Couple days ago.”

“So...” Neil said. “Max jumped out of the car.”

“Yeah.”

“And ran down the road.”

“Yes.”

“Why did she do that?”

The extent to which Billy wanted to tell his father to ask Max that question made him bite his tongue. “We were having a disagreement.”

“Was it about Lucas Sinclair?”

The rush of adrenaline hit and Billy leaned back and clenched his good fist, relaxed, clenched. “Yes, sir.”

“Well.” His father put down his cup of coffee and rubbed his chin. “She’s going to have strong feelings about that.”

Billy sipped his Coke and wondered if fucked up it was that his dad was sounding reasonable and it was somehow more frightening.

“She’s a young girl,” his father said. “They’re...tempestuous. They don’t know what’s good for them.”

“Right.”

Neil got up from the table and Billy braced himself but his dad turned the other way. At the kitchen door he looked back at Billy and said, “This isn’t over.”

Fuck.

Billy waited for things to go sideways all night and they never did.

Yet the anticipation of some big hammer about to fall was somehow worse than a blow. Part of him wanted to lash out and get it over with, but he held his tongue and went to bed a little early after working on his Econ. project. Steve, he assumed, would not want to meet with him again. But he figured he would do his half and Steve could do his half and they'd muddle through an awkward presentation in class. He wasn't looking forward to it.

He rolled over on his side and thought of Steve's hands on his skin again, Steve's lips on his, and wished for a different life where Steve Harrington didn't hate him.

At about three o'clock in the morning, Billy woke up to somebody shaking his shoulder.

"Billy." It was his father. "Wake up. Wake up, son."

"What..."

"C'mon. Stand up."

Billy was bleary and disoriented but he got to his feet in his pajama pants and no shirt. His father was still fully dressed and he'd turned on the light. Billy squinted, trying to adjust.

"It's time to try something new," his father said.

"What are you talking about?" Billy said.

"Listen, everything I do is so you'll realize the consequences of your actions, but you don't-

"She jumped out of the car, dad!" He rubbed his eyes.

"Because you didn't handle her correctly," he said. "I hit you and you learn and then you forget-

"I *don't* forget." It almost made him laugh.

"Turn around." Neil turned Billy so he was facing his full-length mirror and his make-do vanity table.

"You were irresponsible and Max got seriously *hurt*."

“I wasn’t!”

“Maybe this time you won’t be so quick to forget your responsibilities.”

“Dad, what...”

He heard a sound like metal against metal.

Scissors.

His father grabbed a handful of Billy’s hair.

“NO!”

But it had happened all at once and he couldn’t move fast enough. If he had, he supposed, his father might have punched him in the face. He spun around and sure enough, there it was; a pile of Billy’s hair in the palm of his father’s hand. Billy stared at the hair in disbelief and then his father walked over to the vanity table and dropped it into the overflowing ashtray. He held up the scissors and smiled almost kindly.

“Someday,” his father said, “if you do finally straighten up, you’ll understand this. Now go back to bed.”

Then he was gone.

Billy glanced at himself in the mirror and shut his eyes. It was awful. In the front his hair was still wavy and not too bad, but the length was entirely gone. He looked like somebody else, somebody he’d probably hate. He shoved the mirror away from the wall and it fell over and cracked as it met the floor. The hair lying there atop a pile of cigarette butts put him over the edge and he cried out, sweeping everything off the table and kicking the crate that held up its top.

His room was wrecked inside a minute.

When there was nothing left to shove or throw he sank down to his knees and fell back to sit against his bed, dropping his head into his hands. He tugged on his now short hair and wept. He didn’t know how long he sat there before there was a soft knock on the door and

he didn't bother to respond.

The door opened slowly with a noisy creak and Max appeared in her pajamas, her long thick red hair hanging around her face and he felt a swell of anger at her just for having it. He hid behind his hands again.

"What," he said into his hands.

"I heard you scream before." She shifted on her feet. "Was that him hitting you?"

He took his hands away from his face and looked at her.

"Oh," she said.

"Go back to bed, Max."

"I'm sor-"

"Just go back to bed!" He covered his face again and heard the door shut as she left.

Billy couldn't sleep any more that night, but the next day was Saturday, which was a small favor. Instead he sat on his bed, up against the wall, smoking all the cigarettes he had left, and listening to music through his earphones.

He thought about Jane and what she'd said about him not being a monster.

He thought about sitting next to Max at the hospital. It had been...nice. For a little while they'd been on each other's sides. Two against one seemed better than one against everybody.

"Papa," he muttered to himself, and watched sun rise through his blinds. "Fuck you, papa."

He meant to go somewhere but in the morning he found himself only showering and feeling the inward sting of washing so much less hair. He stared at himself in the mirror and for the first time in a long while there was no appreciation at all. He thought he looked gross.

He dressed in jeans and a clean thermal and went back to sitting on his bed, doodling in his Mead, listening to angry music, and forgoing breakfast.

Around noon, there was another soft knock at the door.

“Yeah?” Billy said. He took off his headphones.

Max poked her head in. She hovered there in the doorway, her hands shoved in her pockets.

“Do you blame me?” She asked carefully.

“I blame him.”

“Broke your mirror,” she said, looking around his catastrophe of a room.

“Don’t really want to look at it,” he said, drawing nonsense triangles in his notebook.

Max ambled inside, stepping around the albums and cassettes littering the floor, and loitered, tapping the bright white cast on her arm. “It doesn’t look too bad really.”

He gave her a disbelieving look.

“It’s just shorter,” she said, shrugging.

“It was *mine*.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry I broke your skateboard,” Billy mumbled. She looked confused and he pointed vaguely at his hair. “It’s the same thing.”

“You could wear a hat,” Max said.

“I don’t have any hats.”

Max chewed her lip and said, “Yeah, you do. You have a Raiders hat. It’s good for cold weather too. Where is it?”

Billy put down his notebook and crossed his arms, watching Max survey the room as if the hat would appear in front of her. "Bottom door of my dresser."

Max knelt down and pawed through some t-shirts and pulled out the hat, a thick black beanie with the L.A. Raiders emblem on the front. He'd bought it after going to a game in Los Angeles once with some buddies. He'd never worn it once. Max found the hat and held it with an air of triumph. She sat down on the bed and twisted it in her hands.

"Lemme," Max said.

He leaned forward and Max stuffed the hat over his hair, the little bit of blonde wavy length left peaking out underneath.

"I look like an asshole, don't I?" Billy said.

"Yeah," Max said, "but when don't you?"

Billy rolled his eyes. "Dick."

"It'll grow back." She nudged his bandaged hand with her cast. "Hey, look. We're twins."

Billy sighed and licked his teeth, mulling his options. "You want to go to Dairy Queen?" He said. "It's pretty much like Foster's Freeze."

"It's too cold for ice cream," Max said.

"You want to go anyway?"

At the Dairy Queen, Billy saw Steve Harrington's car among those parked and almost turned around. Steve would be there, in his car, eating a burger. He'd see the Camaro. Billy slowed, hesitating.

"What's the matter?" Max said.

"Nothing."

He pulled into the lot and parked as far from the BMW as possible,

ending up behind the Dairy Queen, hidden from the road and Steve Harrington's eye line at least.

Max was craning her neck to look at the pick-up counter and said, "Oh!"

"What is it?"

"Um...Dustin and Lucas are here. They're up at the counter."

Ah, Billy thought. The boys were definitely here with Steve, who was either some kind of terminal part-time babysitter or needed to get older friends. Possibly both.

"Right," Billy said. He watched Max battle with herself and reached into his pocket, pulling out a few dollars. "Go get whatever you want. Hang out with your friends. I'm gonna chill out here. Least we're out of the house."

"Are you sure?" She looked so scared for him, it killed him a little. He knew he didn't deserve it, least of all from Max. "What if Neil finds out?"

"Fuck Neil. Go."

"Do you want something?" She was already opening the door and bringing in the cold.

"I'll get something later," Billy said. "Go ahead."

Billy watched her jog through the snow, the hood of her jacket bouncing, and she disappeared around the corner of the Dairy Queen, leaving Billy alone with his thoughts again. He cranked up the radio.

Steve Harrington.

As if he'd ever had a real shot with Steve Harrington. Much as he'd played battle for the school, he knew he wasn't a Steve Harrington. Even when Steve was seemingly lost he was somehow a hero. Billy had to fight and bust his ass to be what Steve had been just by being himself. He was pretty sure Steve didn't know that. But that's how Billy thought of him, if only in the chaotic back of his head: Beautiful

brave Steve Harrington, full of fire once the match was lit.

He sat in his car through song after song thinking of Steve Harrington's mouth and Steve Harrington's ass and the curve of Steve Harrington's back while he was showering when there was a loud knock on the passenger window that made him sit forward with a jolt.

Of course, it was Steve Harrington, leaning down and peering through the window in his big fancy coat. Steve pulled the door open.

"What do you want?" Billy said, and shoved his hands in his pockets, staring straight ahead.

"Can I talk to you?"

Billy's "fuck off" go-to was on the tip of his tongue.

"Knock yourself out," Billy said.

Steve had two big styrofoam cups of coffee on a tray. He handed one to Billy as he got in.

"Peace offering," Steve said. "Please don't throw it in my face. I mean that literally."

Billy took the coffee and ignored the good kind of race his heart was running. He remembered his awful hair smooshed down by a dumb Raiders hat and wanted to die as Steve shut the door and sat back his seat.

Steve took a sip of coffee and said, "So Max was just telling us some stuff."

Billy winced. "Big mouth."

"Nah." Steve looked up at him, his brow furrowed. "Just that...it wasn't really your fault. What upset her. It's possible I...jumped to conclusions."

"Yeah, ya did," Billy said, feeling a little smug.

“Okay but...” Steve laughed. “You’re not exactly easy to talk to most of the time.”

Billy took a long drink of coffee and hoped Steve would go on instead of him needing to speak. Which likely proved Steve’s point. He stared out the window at the snow as if searching for answers. As much as he liked to be top dog when everyone was watching, for things like *this* he kind of wished Harrington would just do everything for him.

“Look,” Steve said. “If you want me to fuck off, I’ll fuck off. If you *want* me too.”

Billy rubbed the palm of his sore hand. Everything seemed to be spilling out. What would happen then? Steve would *see* all of him? Would he even like him then?

He heard the click of Steve opening his door.

Don’t.

“Don’t,” Billy said.

He heard Steve shut door again and turn sideways in his seat. Steve sighed heavily and said, “Are you alright?”

“I... have a lot of shit going on,” Billy said and turned a little to face Steve. “Or maybe the normal amount of shit but... I dunno. It’s different now.”

“Yeah...” Steve said. “Like what the hell did you do to your hair? I wasn’t going to say anything but...”

“Ugh.” Billy rubbed his eye. “Think I did this? My dad cut it. My dad’s an asshole. My dad does a lot of...asshole things.”

“Why’d he do that?” Steve said.

“You saw Max’s arm?”

“What?” Steve said. “He blamed you? She said she ran out into the street.”

“She did. He...” Billy pointed to his eye. “He did this too, if you want know the truth.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah well...”

Steve put his coffee in the cup-holder and reached over to pluck the hat off Billy's head.

“*Harrington!*” Billy barked, instantly mortified. “Fuck.”

“Oh, c'mon...” Steve gave him an appraising look and ran his hand through Billy's hair and pushed a lock behind his ear. “I think it looks okay. Just gotta even it out...”

Billy put his coffee down and reached for cigarettes that weren't there. He settled for gripping the steering wheel to have something to do and then changed his mind and turned sideways to fully face Steve who reached out to play with his hair again and stroke Billy's cheek with a thumb that snuck over to touch Billy's bottom lip. Billy pulled Steve to him by the lapel of his coat and they were kissing. Steve's mouth was cold from being outside and Billy kissed Steve's bottom lip and tasted the smallest bit of stubble under his mouth left from a shave and reached up to cradle the back of his head and tug a little bit on that thick hair. Steve kissed him with what even Billy considered *great determination* and he was starting to get hard, yet the fear in the back of his head that said one of the kids or just a stranger could come walking by his distinctive car made him pull away, albeit with great difficulty...after a couple minutes of heated necking.

Steve fucking Harrington.

“Not here,” Billy said, breathless.

“Right. Yeah okay.” Steve nodded and pushed back his hair but somehow his stupid pretty brown eyes were still making out with Billy even if mouth wasn't. He played with the pendant of Billy's necklace hanging over his thermal and took a breath. “Um...there's a bonfire tonight. Out by the quarry. You could stand to blow off some steam, right?”

“I'd definitely like to blow somethin',” Billy said, and stuck out his tongue.

“See, you *told* me to stop and then you go talk like that...”

Billy laughed at him and felt giddy. “Yeah, alright. I’ll show.”

Steve squeezed his good hand and said, “You hungry? Let me get you a burger.”

Billy tapped his finger on the wheel and said, “If you’re buying...”

“I’m buyin’.”

In the rankings of risky behavior, being seen kissing a boy was #1 with a bullet. Being seen eating a burger with both Max and Lucas Sinclair was a few notches below, which wasn’t saying much. But Billy was in no mood to put himself out for Neil anymore, especially over something so *stupid*, consequences be damned. Yet he still worried.

The kids were standing out by the BMW eating fries *and* blizzards in the freezing cold. There was a FotoMat that blocked a view of them from the road and that set Billy’s mind at ease a little. He wondered if he would be forever trying to hide things from Neil in Hawkins. It was too small for that. It wouldn’t last.

Billy rubbed his hands together, yet as they walked out Steve offhandedly said that he probably hadn’t needed his coat.

They’re all out of their minds, Billy thought.

Max was laughing at something Sinclair at something Sinclair and Billy crossed his arms and gave them a nod, standing awkwardly nearby but not near enough to be *with* them. The Henderson kid was giving him some serious side-eye but Sinclair gave him a nod. Billy had to wonder how much Max had told them after all.

“So you guys are friends?” Henderson said to Billy, nodding over at Steve as he went to order burgers.

Billy shrugged.

“That’s *weird*,” Henderson said.

"I don't mind," Sinclair said.

"You don't?" Dustin said. "Don't you remember how-"

"*Dustin*," Sinclair said. "It's fine." He exchanged a look with Max and Billy wondered if Max and Sinclair had peeled off and she'd told him a little more than she'd told the others. The thought that anyone else knew how his father treated him made his stomach tight. He blew into his hands, zipped his leather jacket up, and stomped his feet. He had no idea how to act around Max's friends. He didn't even have a particular urge to be hostile towards them, all that was now directed towards his father. At least for the moment.

You're not a monster either, Jane had said. He didn't want to disappoint Jane. Or Max.

Max gave Billy a hopeful smile.

"Hey, I come in peace," Billy said, putting his hands up. "Besides, that kick to the balls was no joke."

Sinclair laughed at that but said. "Yeah, and don't forget it."

Dustin muttered, "I wonder if we've slipped into a third universe..."

Steve brought him a burger and they sat on the hood eating as the kids horsed around and threw slushy snowballs. The boys kept talking about how cool Max's cast was and how they would draw an X-Men logo on it when they got the chance.

Out of nowhere, Henderson said to Steve: "So now that you guys are friends, are you going to stop asking Max a *million* questions about her brother?"

Billy about choked on his burger and his eyes went to Steve who had turned bright red. He mumbled something with his mouth full, his brows turned down. Billy's heart swelled in his chest.

"Oh, what was that, Harrington?" Billy said, tapping his ear. "Didn't hear ya?"

Steve swallowed and said, "I was...keeping an eye out. Just...you know. Being friendly."

“So you were keeping an eye out or being friendly?” Billy said.

“You’re a dick,” Steve muttered, smiling at his burger.

“I guess,” Henderson said. “I dunno what him having a girlfriend or not has to do with keeping an eye out-”

“Dustin!”

Billy looked to Steve, dropping his smirk. It sounded an awful lot like Steve had been asking Max about him since long before they’d kissed. He put that thought away for later but he couldn’t help nudging Steve with his knee.

“I’m just saying,” Henderson said. “Oh! Hey, Max, Hopper said that Elev-”

“DUSTIN!” Sinclair said and tossed Billy a significant glance which Billy did not miss.

Dustin took a breath and said, “Hopper’s *Springer Spaniel* whose name is Eleven can...come out. Ya know. To hang out with...people. So. If Max wants to come with us...”

Billy raised an eyebrow and said, “You’re all going to hang out with the Chief of Police’s *Springer Spaniel*. Whose name is *Eleven*.”

Max looked like she was trying not to laugh and the boys seemed panicked.

“I was *going* to mention that later,” Sinclair said, gritting his teeth. “When there weren’t other people around who might not...be interested in...*Springer Spaniels*?”

Billy said, “Harrington, what the hell are they talking about?”

“I swear to God, it’s nothing that should give you the *heebie jeebies*.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious.” He wagged his tongue at Steve who gave him a wink.

Henderson nodded at Billy and said, “Is he cool now because he cut his hair? Did the evil reside in his hair?”

Steve snorted a laugh at that and Billy just glared at the kid until he pulled the bill of his cap low over his eyes and sucked on his Blizzard, staring at the ground.

But Billy was feeling too good to be genuinely angry even after the loss of his hair though it was a sort of constant ache just like his sore hand. “The evil resides in my earring, kid. And it can come back at any time. So watch your ass.”

Henderson gave him a long look and said to Sinclair, “Chaotic Evil reformed into Chaotic Neutral... That’s interesting.”

Sinclair gave Billy an appraising look and said, “I’d go Neutral Evil to Chaotic Neutral.”

“You guys are both wrong,” Max said. “He’s actually Lawful Evil to Chaotic Neutral. Trust me.”

Henderson and Sinclair both said, “No way!”

“Harrington, they’re really freaking me out right now.”

“Just go with it, man.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I swear the M rating will kick in in the next chapter.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

The end of the beginning.

When they got back from the DQ, Billy trimmed his own hair as well as he could and played with some mousse he bought at the drugstore and when he had it as good as it could be, his hair didn't look bad, but it still didn't look like *him*. His blonde was wavy and teased up a little bit, tapering down in the back.

The idea that his dad had so easily taken something so significant and that could hurt him more than a smack made him want to smash walls.

Unfortunately, he'd already smashed his room up something awful and knew enough to get to work putting it back together quickly so his dad wouldn't start something. When that was done, he finished up the business plan for the Econ. project and plowed through the rest of his homework, made more difficult from the growing anticipation of seeing Steve that night. Beers around a fire sounded fun enough but he was more excited about the prospect of potentially getting Steve alone. If they parked somewhere dark enough it would be impossible to see through car windows.

He was more uncertain about what to wear than he could ever remember being but winter had made his usual M.O. difficult. In the end he he put on a black t-shirt and a solid red flannel shirt under his leather jacket. There would be a giant fire and booze, he imagined that would be warm enough. He wore his best (meaning his tightest) pair of jeans..

There were other ways of keeping warm too, he thought, and smirked to himself as he grabbed his keys.

He'd found a speeding ticket from a few days ago and it sat on his vanity table, pinned by his ashtray, mocking him. He'd have to figure

out how the hell he was going to pay that off. But first: Steve Harrington.

In the car he caught his reflection and winced. He kept forgetting about his hair and then remembering and it felt like a little death every time.

It wasn't hard to find the bonfire down in a clearing near the bottom of the quarry that met some bit of forest. Billy just followed the line of familiar cars; girls hooting as they leaned out the window, not nearly clothed enough for the chilly air. Billy parked and lit up, sticking his cig in his mouth as he passed out high fives on his way to the growing gathering. It was a small victory that even if some things were shit, people at school still acted as if he had it made. He wasn't about to tell them otherwise.

There were two kegs going for the occasion. Billy hassled Tommy, who had either forgotten about their incident with the tuna sandwich or been put in his place, and punched team mates in the shoulder before somebody handed him a beer. He squinted through the blazing fire and spotted Harrington's hair on the other side. Steve was staring right back at him, red cup in his hand, a knowing smile on his face. Jonathan Byers was talking to him but Steve didn't appear to be listening. Billy moved where he could see Steve better but remained on the other side of the fire, sipping his beer and smoking, not listening to whoever was talking to him. Steve wore a grey pea-coat and a cream cable-knit sweater and a blue scarf, looking every bit the privileged little prep.

Billy didn't know why that was such an incredible turn-on to him and he didn't really want to know.

An hour later Billy's arms were quivering as he held himself upside down atop the keg, sucking down beer, his legs were wavering. He fought for balance, all the blood rushing to his head. His sore hand was about killing him but he was having too much fun to give in.

"NINETEEN!...TWENTY!...TWENTY-ONE!..."

Two feet across from him Steve Harrington was performing a much more impressive keg stand than Billy thought he would be capable of.

But he supposed there had to have been a reason he'd held the title.

He craned his neck a little and caught Steve's eye. Steve winked.

"TWENTY-TWO!...TWENTY-THREE...!"

They'd both broken their records.

Billy stuck his tongue out at Harrington who immediately began to fall and two bystanders helped him to his feet. He pushed his hair back and grinned at Billy who smoothly let himself down and hopped up again to pats on the back.

Everybody cheered.

"Billy! Billy!"

Billy ignored them and reached out to shake Steve's hand, giving him a suggestive leer. Steve raised an eyebrow.

"Gave me a run for my money, Harrington." Billy said.

"Hey, I know when I'm *licked*," Steve said. Billy snorted a laugh at that and he grabbed Steve's arm leading him out beyond the fire, reveling in the way Steve followed and squeezed his hand. Billy was pleasantly buzzed but not drunk. Of course, his instinct was to get completely hammered but he was counting on action with Steve and he wanted to be in top form for that. He didn't want to go forgetting it either. Billy had been partying since he was twelve back when it had been sneaking into teenage ragers passing for fourteen. To some degree, he did know what he was doing.

Steve came around him and started yanking him along and Billy found he liked that even better. Steve took him to a deserted little spot behind a cluster of trees and backed him against a giant Ash.

"What was that about getting licked?" Billy tugged Harrington in close and tongue kissed his neck.

Steve chuckled and said, "Oh, that was just for show." He pulled back and ran his hands up Billy's arms, giving Billy a teasing kiss. "You're goin' down, Hargrove."

“Really?” Billy tried to pull him closer, but Steve kept gently resisting. “And what exactly does that mean? ‘Cause I’m about to show you who’s boss, pretty boy.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Steve kissed him hard, just this side of aggressive, and licked in inside Billy’s mouth, pressing him back against the tree. When he pulled back again Billy was breathless, reflexively seeking out another kiss. “See you act so tough...” Steve said quietly, placing a palm to Billy’s chest.

“Act?” Billy gave him a wary look.

“Fine,” Steve said. “Yeah, you’re very tough. But you also *love* it when I make you work for it...”

Just the way Steve put it was making Billy hard already. “You think you know me so well,” Billy murmured.

Steve slid his hand up under Billy’s shirt. “You like it when I play hard, when I show you some fire? Right?”

He ground up against Billy and his thumb brushed Billy’s nipple. “Shit,” Billy murmured, his head tipping back.

Steve kissed him lightly along his neck and whispered, “Do you? Tell me.”

Billy grinned and watched Harrington through heavy lidded yes. “Fuck you, Harrington.”

“Aw.”

Steve pinched his nipple.

“Ah!”

“That’s so mean,” Steve said. He raked his nails down Billy’s chest and plunged his tongue into Billy’s mouth and sucked on Billy’s upper lip until Billy was melting against the tree, lightheaded. “Tell me.”

Billy sighed and tipped his head back again staring up at the snowy branches overhead; the cold air on his skin, Steve’s warm hands

everywhere, his crazy hair brushing Billy's chin and cheek, the taste of his tongue... Billy licked his teeth, his smile wide.

"I like it." He reached up and curled his fingers in Steve's hair, some of it was stiff from hairspray but some of it was as soft as he'd imagined it would be.

"I *knew* it."

"But only from you, asshole."

"Better only be me," Steve said and squeezed Billy's hips, leaning down to suck a spot on his neck. They stood there making out in the dark until Billy was hard as a rock in his jeans and then Steve whispered in his ear.

"You wanna go to my car?" His breath was hot. "Found a hidden spot."

"If you don't take me to your car, I'm gonna kill you," Billy said, his voice low.

Steve pulled him by the hand and then they were running through the woods, jumping over logs and making sharp turns around boulders and Billy didn't even notice the car until Steve swung him around, pushing Billy's jacket off his shoulders, backing him up against the BMW. Billy shivered in the cold and tugged on Steve's scarf, mouthing absently along his jaw.

Steve was trying to reach around and unlock the car and he fumbled, distracted by Billy's mouth. Billy laughed into his neck.

"Just how much do I turn you on?" Billy said.

"Not answering that," Steve muttered. "But I've gone through about three boxes of Kleenex."

Billy snorted a laugh at that and then Steve was opening a door and gently pushing Billy down into the backseat. Billy kicked off his boots and when he unbuttoned his fly, his shirt riding up over his stomach, he saw Steve give him a particular look; his mouth parted, his big brown eyes wide.

Shit, I'm falling in love, Billy thought, from a strange sort of distance.

Then Steve was on top of him, shirtless, bracing himself on his elbows, his hair falling down over his eyes.

"What do you want to do," Steve said, nuzzling Billy's neck. "I have stuff..."

Billy squeezed his ass. "I want you to fuck me, Harrington. You up for that?"

"*Jesus*." Steve kissed him, his lips hot and full. He sat up, straddling Billy, still hunched over in the too-small space. "I am very literally up for it." Billy took off his shirt, struggling a little and Steve pulled it off his arms. "You're so..." His rubbed his hands up and down Billy's chest and Billy's muscles quivered in response. "I dunno," Steve mumbled. "I just really love your body so thanks for never wearing a fucking shirt."

Billy laughed at that and ran his hands up Steve's back to feel his muscles under his palms. "You never pay me the same courtesy, do ya?"

"I guess that's why you ogle me in the showers," Steve said and pressed his finger to Billy's mouth.

"I don't ogle," Billy muttered and kissed his finger.

"That's the biggest lie I've ever heard...God..." He watched Billy's tongue do lascivious things to his finger and ground their dicks together and Billy's jeans felt much too tight.

"Harrington, fuck.." Billy leaned back and they struggled in the backseat, making the car rock, and getting halfway out of their jeans.

Lube made an appearance.

"Thirty degrees and you don't wear underwear," Steve mumbled.

He had two fingers inside Billy whose mouth was wide open as he sporadically tested himself, pushing into it as Steve licked and nibbled on his nipples.

Actually doing the deed proved...difficult.

But Billy was so giddy that it was all *happening* with Steve fucking Harrington that it assuaged his frustration and eventually he was on his stomach, half kneeling, breathing hard into his fist as Steve pushed into him, his arm around Billy's waist, his palm holding Billy's stomach as he thrust and Billy felt so full and surrounded by Steve's smell and Steve's heat and Steve making absurd little noises and whispering about how *amazing* Billy was... His dick was pressed into the leather of the back seat, he thought he would die.

"Billy...Billy...God..." Steve gripped his shoulders and pushed in a little roughly and in just the right way and Billy felt tears sliding down his face. He turned his head, the leather warm on his cheek. Steve leaned down to kiss his face, pushed into the hilt and abruptly came with a cry that made Billy laugh a little. He rode Billy through his orgasm and collapsed on top of him, panting and Billy reached back to muss up his hair, everything impossibly hot.

Minutes later Billy was sitting up facing forward, Steve with his jeans pulled up but only half covering his ass as he leaned down, taking Billy in his mouth. It didn't take Billy long, with his fingers tangled up in Steve's hair--his hips occasionally jerking and out of his control--for him to come, mumbling Steve's name, sliding a hand down the elegant curve of Steve's back. Steve sat up, coughing and wiping his mouth, his lips swollen and red.

"Jesus, you look hot like that," Billy said.

Steve kissed his neck and slumped against him, half hugging him, as they caught their breath. Steve came up with a cigarette as if by magic and Billy found his Zippo in his jeans pocket and gave him a light. They passed the cigarette back and forth and Steve played with Billy's hair.

"What if you grew the whole thing out?" Steve said. "Instead of leaving it short in front."

"You gonna do my hair now? Billy said, reaching an arm around to hold Steve. "Make me use whatever girly shit you're using?"

"It's not girly," Steve said, but he looked embarrassed. He took Billy's other hand in his, his thumb running over the bandages. "Did he hurt your hand too?"

"Nah," Billy said, taking a drag. "I did that."

"Not a car door?" Steve said.

"No, I...punched a tree."

Steve blinked at him. "Why? Was the tree being a dick?"

"No," Billy said with a snort. "I was just in a bad mood."

Steve brought Billy's hand to mouth and kissed his knuckles softly. "Don't hurt yourself."

Don't hurt yourself, Jane had said.

"If you're in a bad mood, come bother me," Steve said. "Don't have to talk. We can play basketball or something."

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" Billy said, and his face was hot, though he kept his expression, only glancing away.

Stupid things like that just kept jumping out of his mouth lately.

Steve pulled away and looked at him hard. "No. I don't."

Billy nodded and thought: *I want to be like you.*

Billy went home around one feeling warm and not even caring about his hair. The lights were still on in the house. Susan usually went to bed early. He remembered that Max had been scheduled to go to some girl's sleepover she'd been invited to that she didn't care about but which Susan had insisted on. Neil would be up. There was every chance he'd somehow heard about the happy little friend family

hanging out at the DQ, though it had only been a day. Billy racked his brain for anything else that might be a problem. There was no way his father could know about Steve, he didn't think. Even given Neil's tyrannical demands, being seen standing next to a boy his own age at the Dairy Queen was not yet an offense. He was pretty sure.

Of course, he smelled like Steve right now. Be he didn't think his dad would pick up on that. He didn't smell like sex anyway, only cigarettes and snow.

Neil was watching *I Love Lucy* in the living room and Billy resolutely ignored him. There was no immediate reason to have a tight stomach, he told himself. Things were okay. Things were so good with Steve and Max... But in his room he backed up against his door and shut his eyes.

"Jane," Billy said to nobody. "I know you're not a fucking saint or anything. But if you can hear this, kinda wish you were here right now."

He wasn't drunk but he felt a little jolt of hysteria at his own ridiculous prayer.

The speeding ticket was gone.

Billy stared at his vanity table where the yellow slip of paper should have been and he stopped breathing.

"Billy." He could hear his father from the living room.

No no no.

Things happened quickly.

His father was in a seemingly good mood. At first.

"Come watch with me."

Billy sat stiff and braced for the unknown until a second episode of *I Love Lucy* was over.

It began with the ticket and changed course until Billy just lost his

shit and started screaming at his father about *everything*, half out of his mind. Neil did not respond well to that. Billy couldn't even believe what was coming out of his mouth except that it felt so good in the moment he kept going.

Billy's father was usually careful, deliberate. When he hit Billy, he meant it. He didn't lose control. Everything was strategic, sober. But Billy's father also wasn't used to Billy fighting back quite so much. It was complicating things.

Now Neil had him pressed against the fridge, his fingers wrapped around Billy's throat.

"What do I have to do to get you to fall in line?" Neil said. "Why don't you tell me?"

Billy couldn't answer because he could barely breathe.

"And now you're dragging Maxine down with you and that is unacceptable."

"Dad," Billy wheezed.

"I told you to keep her away from the kid."

"Stop..." He squeezed his eyes shut and gripped his father's wrist.

It was stupid, some part of his brain thought. Stupid to ever fight back and also stupid that he couldn't take his dad. He would never be able to. He was strong, wasn't he? Why did he feel so weak and small around this one asshole?

"If you won't listen to me, maybe Maxine will."

That sparked some memory. Billy tried to gain traction on the slick linoleum floor but his boots kept slipping.

Since Maxine won't listen to me maybe you will.

He'd been ready to beat the shit out of that little kid.

No.

He felt himself crying. No no, that would be worse.

He clawed at his father's wrist and gained a little room. "Leave Max alone!"

"Stop *crying*."

The lights went out.

Or, they didn't so much go out as much as every lightbulb in the house abruptly exploded and they were thrown into darkness.

Neil said, "What the-"

Then Neil was yanked away by an invisible force. Billy watched him, as he was thrown into the air, nearly hitting the ceiling before he slammed into the opposite wall, sending Susan's beloved framed water colors crashing down.

Billy whispered, "Jane."

Neil was trying to get to his feet and then he was thrown into the living room. It reminded Billy of *The Exorcist*; as if some demon was tossing Neil around like a toy.

Billy crept out to the living room and saw Jane, looming in the dark at the front open front door. She was wearing her parka, the hood pulled low over her eyes, her hand stretched out then jerking as she threw Neil from one end of the room to the other. Swirls of snowflakes flew around her.

She didn't look like a saint so much as an avenging angel.

"You don't hurt Billy!" Jane shouted. "You don't hurt Max! YOU DON'T HURT THEM!"

Billy heard Susan scream. She was standing in the hall off the living room, hands clasped to her mouth.

Finally Neil was left in a heap by the sofa, his hands up over his head. He was trembling.

“YOU DON’T HURT BILLY AND MAX!”

Neil whimpered in response.

Then Jane was gone.

Billy came to his senses and ran out of the house. He saw Jane running down the street and chased after her. He’d taken off his jacket and the cold so late at night was too much, making his limbs stiff and unwieldy.

“Jane! Jane wait!”

Jane disappeared around a corner and by the time Billy got there, she was gone. Which he should have expected. He wondered if she’d flown away. Billy had cigarettes in his pocket and he took his time walking back to the house, smoking, coming down from the adrenaline rush and the panic. He had an urge to pump his fist. Weeks ago he might have felt humiliated that some little girl had saved him from his daddy. But he didn’t quite think of Jane that way because Jane understood him. She was more like a friend who happened to be a little girl. Which was maybe weird. But she clearly wasn’t ordinary anyway.

She’s not an angel, he thought to himself. She had been through some shit. That was certain. Probably more than anything Billy had been through. She had that way about her.

She was sort of a superhero though. Maybe more superhero than saint. He thought of the comics he used to read as a kid. Maybe Jane was an alien, like Superman.

Billy’s superhero friend. They always had sad childhoods.

By the time he got home, the knocked over furniture was set back in place, broken glass swept up from the kitchen, though the house still looked a mess. Neil and Susan had disappeared into the bedroom. Billy went to his room and lay down on his bed and, absurdly, imagined Jane wearing a cape, flying through the snow.

In the morning, Billy’s father didn’t say a word and barely made an appearance at breakfast, but when Billy saw him he noted the still

terrified expression on his face and had to stifle a laugh. Even Max noticed it and only seemed confused. She asked her mother why the curtain rod had broken off the living room windows and Susan mumbled something about stumbling and tearing them down by accident. The exploded lightbulbs were tossed off as an electrical short. It sounded ridiculous. Max was clearly alarmed at that and immediately looked to Billy, who sat cheerfully eating his eggs. Billy smiled and gave her a wink. He'd have to explain this. As much as it was his own amazing secret, he found himself wanting to share it with Max.

On the way to school Max asked him if "monsters" had attacked the house.

Billy thought she was joking as he pulled up. "Uh...no."

She was visibly relieved and Billy put it down to the weirdness of teenage girls.

At school, Steve sat next to him in Econ. and they talked about their project, while under the table Steve's hand clutched his knee and every time he rubbed his thumb there in an absentminded circle, Billy wanted to kiss him. Billy's hand was well enough for basketball and when he played Harrington now, he couldn't stop smiling every time Steve tried to block him or steal the ball. At one point Steve hip-checked him and for no reason it made Billy laugh so hard he fell down, holding his stomach as Steve just stood over him, bouncing the ball and smirking. The coach told him to get his head together and benched him for the rest of the game.

They disappeared to the bleachers at lunch and made out in the snow until the bell rang. In study hall he drew a Super Jane; fierce curls and a flowing cape.

He decided to take Max to the woods to meet Jane.

"Are you sure you're not taking me out to the woods to kill me?" Max said. Billy actually looked at her to make sure she was joking. Billy

had been careful. He'd taken her home first to ask if they could go out again. Neil didn't even say anything. He was sitting at the kitchen table, still looking traumatized and banged up. Susan was rattled to but smiled and said it was fine. Billy's plan was to never explain anything and hope Neil thought he had a superhero on his ass if he ever came at Billy or Max. Which happened to be true.

"Hey, which one of us stabbed the other with a goddamn syringe," Billy said.

"You deserved it."

"I still have a point."

When Billy pulled up to the woods off Kerley, the same spot where he had encountered Jane both times, Max hesitated outside the car, rubbing at her cast. Her friends had already doodled all over it and signed their names in big kid letters.

"Are you sure you didn't see any monsters? Unidentifiable...creatures?" Max said. "What are you taking me to see?"

"You'll find out," Billy said. "It'll be cool. Trust me."

"Ha!"

He went around to her side and tugged at the hood of her jacket as she tromped across the road to the woods. "Careful, Max."

"I fell one time," Max said. "And I was running."

"Just watch your step alright?"

"Okay."

Billy led Max into the woods. At least it wasn't dark yet. Max's nerves eased and she seemed relaxed, hopping from log to log, humming. Billy watched her and wondered again if El had scared Neil into backing off. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he wasn't going to let his father get to Max. Not while he was breathing. This thing was Steve was definitely an asset too, he thought. Besides

being...awesome. Steve would obviously stand between any of those kids and danger and Billy had the memory of those fists in his face to prove it.

"What happened last night?" Max said. "I know it wasn't an electrical short."

"I'll explain later," Billy said, not knowing what he was going to tell her.

"Hey!" That was the Sinclair kid, suddenly appearing from behind a tree and grinning from ear to ear. "Max! What're you doing here?"

Max lit up. "What're *you* doing here?"

"We're looking for pinecones."

"Max!" The Henderson kid came up behind Lucas. When he saw Billy he looked a little startled but granted him a nod.

"Pinecones?" Max said.

Lucas said, "Dustin's mom wants to build some crazy bird feeder out of pinecones? So we're collecting them. Except Steve won't let us go to the woods alone anymore so-"

"Steve?" Billy said, heart stuttering a little.

"Hey!" Steve came jogging through the snow. "Billy! What're you guys-"

"Billy's taking me to see some mysterious *thing*," Max said, rolling her eyes. "I think he might be nuts."

"What mysterious thing?" Steve said darkly.

"Not like that," Max said.

"Like what?" Billy said.

"Nothing!" Sinclair said. "What is it?"

Billy rubbed his face, irritated. He had no intention of telling them *all*

about Jane. That was not the deal. Harrington yes, once Billy was sure Steve wouldn't just think he was crazy. But definitely not the other rugrats.

"It's just a..." Billy shrugged. "A nice view."

Steve looked warily amused. "A nice view?"

"Well," Henderson said. "Hopper's cabin is right over here, we were gonna go see El-"

"Dustin!"

"The *Springer Spaniel*," Dustin said, glaring at Sinclair. "Mike and Will are coming too. But she might be around here actually... The Springer Spaniel, I mean."

"Yeah, I'll keep my eyes peeled for Springer Spaniels," Billy said, taking out a cigarette.

Kids were so weird.

Steve came up next to him and nudged his arm. "Hey you."

"Hey." Billy smiled around his cig as he lit up.

They heard voices to the west and Billy saw short figures approaching, the tops of dark heads.

"Guys!" Nancy Wheeler's little brother bounded through the trees, following by Byers' little brother, that "zombie kid" Billy had heard bizarre stories about. The kids chattered at each other, Wheeler giving Billy the stink eye.

"Hold on," Wheeler said, looking back over his shoulder. "I can't let... If *he's* here... Hold on."

Steve stared at Billy, as if sizing him up. "How much can we trust you?"

Billy gave him a funny look. "Is this about the fucking Springer Spaniel? What is up with you people?"

“Billy!”

It was Jane, barging into the snowy clearing, curly hair whipping about. Mike followed, eyes big and worried.

“Jane!” Billy said.

Everyone who wasn’t Jane looked at Billy and said, “*What?*”

Sinclair gaped at him. “You know Eleven?”

Henderson punched Sinclair’s shoulder. “We’re not supposed to call her that around people!”

Billy shook his head. “Eleven...?”

The “Springer Spaniel.”

Holy shit.

Jane was smiling, covering her mouth. She looked sort of mischievous.

Billy pointed at her, trying to catch up with reality. “Wait...you guys know *Jane...*”

“How do *you* know Jane?” Steve said.

“She...” Billy looked to Jane as if for some help, but she only smiled. She was not the most talkative girl. He took a drag on his cigarette and said, “She helped me out.”

He caught Jane’s eye and had to swallow a lump in his throat. “Thanks. By the way. Jane. Or...Eleven. Whatever.”

Jane only said, “We’re friends.”

“Yeah.” He scratched his head and smoked, avoiding all the little eyes staring at him.

He still wasn’t about to tell them the details of just how Jane had helped him, besides which revealing that revealed things about Jane herself that seemed too important to start blabbing about with

everyone even if they did all appear to be her friends too.

Max said, "Well...are you guys all going to the cabin? Can we come?"

Mike pointed at Billy and said, "*He* can't come!"

Jane whipped around and glared at Wheeler. "Yes, he *can*, Mike!"

Mike took a step back, mouth dropping open at the intensity of her response and Jane marched over to Billy and grabbed his hand. "He's allowed."

Billy smirked and let himself be led by the girl, winking at all the boys. "Yeah that's right, dipshits. I'm allowed in your secret club. Suck it."

He could hear Steve laughing behind them and Max insisting to Sinclair that she had *no* idea how Billy knew Jane or Eleven or whatever her name was. The walk to the cabin was *nice*. Billy didn't even mind all the annoying boys shouting about *X-Men* or whatever it was they were talking about. Jane led him along and Steve took his other hand because nobody seemed to be watching. Max hooked her arm through Lucas's and starting loudly singing that stupid *Star Wars* song, glancing back at Billy, as if to mock him. He shook his head at her, rolling his eyes.

Billy was instructed to step over a tripwire after which he nudged Steve and said. "Seriously, are you guys some kind of survivalists kid's club? What is all this?"

"Uh... It's gonna take a year to explain," Steve said, chuckling. They were waiting at the stairs to the cabin. Steve frowned suddenly and reached up, touching Billy's neck. "You got bruises. Something happen?"

"Oh..." Billy nodded. "Yeah. Turned out okay actually."

"Take a year to explain?"

"Yeah." Steve had his concerned face on and squeezed Billy's hand. Billy said, "Things might get a little better now? I'm not sure. But...Max is on my side. You're on my side. Maybe it won't be as bad as it was." He shrugged, feeling stupid and laid open.

All the kids were hooting, running up the steps to the cabin where there were warm amber lights behind the windows and Hawkins' Chief of Police in the doorway, already looking exhausted as his home was invaded by tiny nerds.

Steve tugged him a little closer. "If it is bad, you tell me. Right?"

Billy nodded and because nobody was looking he gave Steve a peck on the lips. "Yeah."

But everyone was inside now so Billy and Steve loitered a bit in the cold, kissing by a tree. Steve had the collar of his coat turned up and Billy tugged on it, fixated on Steve's bottom lip. Billy heard footsteps and broke away as Max came running out.

"Guys, c'mon! We're all gonna play Risk! Billy, you're on my team!"

"*What?*" Billy glowered up at her. She was standing there on the top step, her hand on her hip, her casted arm swinging. "I'm not playing goddamn Risk."

"Yeah, you are!"

"Yeah, you are," Steve echoed, and when she was gone Steve laughed into his neck. "You're cute."

"Fuck off." But he kissed him again, and circled his waist, clutching Harrington tight.

"Billy!" Jane appeared before Steve could move but she didn't seem remotely surprised by their closeness as they broke away, blushing. At least, Billy thought, it was Jane who saw them.

Billy said, "Uh-"

"Do you like Eggos?" Jane seemed very serious about the question.

"Eggos?" Billy looked to Steve who gave him nothing. "Yeah. 'Course. Who doesn't like Eggos?"

"Good." She went back inside.

“Eggos, Harrington?”

“Oh man.” Steve patted him on the back. “You have a lot to learn. Eggos, Dungeons and Dragons...”

“I’m *not* playing Dungeons and fucking Dragons,” Billy said, following Steve to the stairs.

“You say that now...”

“Harrington!”

“You’ll probably get into it, start tellin’ me to plant my paladin feet or some shit,” Steve said, leading Billy up the stairs beside him.

“Wait, *you’re* playing it?”

“Just once!” Steve pulled open the door. The boys were hotly debating Risk around a coffee table and Max and Eleven were perched on the couch playing thumb war but Max kept laughing and half falling over. Hopper bustled around the kitchen, grumbling about kids with bottomless stomachs.

“Are you any good at it?” Billy smirked at Steve as they hovered in the doorway.

“Oh my God,” Steve said. “Now you just want to play so you can beat me. It’s not even that kind of game.”

“I’ll make it that kinda game.” Billy tugged on Steve’s collar again and watched him go pink.

Steve ruffled his hair and said, “Just come inside already. Let’s get you good and warm.”

Notes for the Chapter:

The last chapter of this story. But I like this particular universe so I think I might more stories that take place in it. Fun Billy & Eleven times etc.